

# Living with a Terminal Diagnosis

## “A Powerful Emotional & Spiritual Journey”

Connie Myslik-McFadden

When a coffee mug slips out of Celeste O’Connell’s hand and shatters on her tile floor, she realizes something is terribly wrong with her. The recent stumbles on the stairs, the deepening of her voice, the weakness in her right arm and leg, are part of a mysterious pattern of frightening changes in her body.

Celeste is diagnosed with a terminal illness. She struggles to accept her fate and the loss of everything she loves—her husband, her college-age children, her work, and the rugged, spectacular Montana environment in which she lives. She creates a bucket list and tries to complete everything on the list, but as her symptoms worsen, she finds she cannot. A startling dream leads Celeste to a therapist who helps her explore her dreams and long-neglected beliefs about life and death.

### Excerpts—

Celeste thought about the ten commandments. How many had she broken? She had not committed adultery (though tempted twice), nor stolen, nor murdered anyone. Well, maybe in her heart once or twice. She had certainly taken the name of the Lord in vain, swearing more times than she wanted anyone, especially God, to know. She definitely coveted her neighbor’s gorgeous log home on a knoll high above the river. And what about the first commandment? ‘Love the Lord thy God with all your heart and soul,’ that one. Not even close. How could she obey that first commandment when she wasn’t even sure God existed? He or She was an idea, not a reality.

*Maybe I am being punished. I’m going to die young because I turned my back on my parents’ church,*

*turned my back on religion. I’m never going to make it through those pearly gates. If there are any pearly gates.*

Her eyes drooped closed, and she fell asleep. In her dream a translucent pale blue angel floated nearby, filmy white wings fluttering, a halo of light around her head and shoulders and a kind smile on her face. She spoke to Celeste in a soft voice:

*Open your heart, and help will come to you in the form of a path. Follow the path. Your body will fade, but your soul will rise in joy.*

Celeste woke with a start, her entire body trembling with fear and wonder. She had never dreamed an angel before.

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She fell the next morning on her way to the chicken coop. Both legs suddenly collapsed, and she flew forward, hitting her head on the hard-packed snow. She lay still for a moment, the twelve-degree cold icing her face, her head aching, stunned that both legs had given out at the same time. She raised her upper body by straightening her arms next to her shoulders, drew her knees under her, and tried to push herself to a standing position. Neither her arms nor her legs would cooperate. Her arms trembled uncontrollably from the effort. Panic rushed from her solar plexus to her chest and throat. She fought it down, panting heavily, rolled onto her left buttock to give her arms a rest.

*I have to think.*

She had her Gizmo on her wrist but hesitated to use it.

*This isn’t a true emergency, just a fall. I don’t need help.*



She looked around. It was only fifteen feet to the chicken fence. She would crawl to it. She placed her hands back down on the snow and began crawling. She hadn’t worn gloves and her bare hands were numb with cold. Her sweatpants were too thin to protect her legs; her kneecaps felt like they were on fire. Her legs responded reluctantly to her will, one knee moving slowly forward, then another, resisting the whole way. She reached the gate. Grabbing hold of one of the wooden crossbars, then another, she pulled herself up, praying that her legs would support her. Sweat beaded her face, dampened her armpits.

Slowly, slowly she was able to stand. Her head hurt, a lot. She clung to the gate while a wave of dizziness passed through her. Opening the gate, she took one careful step toward the feed pail, then another, scooped out feed and scattered it on the snow, then walked shakily to the henhouse and let

the chickens out. They rushed toward their breakfast, cackling loudly.

As she made her way cautiously back to the house she felt stupid and guilty and depressed. The walker was still in the garage. Why hadn't she used it? What level of denial had made her believe she could entertain her book group women without exhausting herself? Ross had done everything he could to keep her safe; she had not done her part.

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There was a truck and small horse trailer stopped halfway off the rough road to the campground, and Ross got out to speak to the driver. When he came back he lifted Celeste out of the passenger seat and into her wheelchair, which Ginger had quietly taken out of the van. Celeste was confused.

"What's going on? Is he stuck?"

"It's a woman. She'll move it in a few minutes."

Rebecca got out of her car and stood by Celeste, hand resting gently on her shoulder. Luann stayed by the van, looking anxious. An unfamiliar ponytailed woman opened the back door of the trailer, let the ramp down, and backed a small gray horse out. Celeste watched in growing amazement as the woman quietly saddled the horse with a fleece covered chair-like contraption—high backed, low sided—somehow attached to it. Celeste glanced at Ross and Ginger, who were watching her with delighted expressions.

"Is this what I think it is? I can't believe it!" she cried.

Tears ran down her face as the woman led the horse over to where she was sitting.

"I'm Barb," she said, smiling. "I run a therapeutic riding program in Bozeman, and I'm going to lead you and Smoky to the campground. Ross will walk on one side and Ginger on the other. How does that sound?"

"Unbelievably wonderful!"

**"As much an act of devotion and healing as a work of fiction, Connie Myslik-McFadden's novel takes a thorough, clear-eyed look at living with a terminal diagnosis. The work offers much comfort and wisdom for readers coping with terminal illness in the lives of their own loved ones. The novel's heart is in Celeste's acceptance of her approaching death, and Myslik-McFadden renders this emotional and spiritual journey with clarity and power."**

—BookLife Prize

Smoky nuzzled Celeste's hair with soft lips.

"OK, let's get this show on the road," Ross said, suddenly all business. He lifted Celeste onto Smoky. She began laughing with joy. Barb wrapped Velcro around her legs and secured them to the fenders. Instead of reins she placed Celeste's hands around a band in front of the saddle.

"OK, Ross and Ginger, I want you one on each side. Walk close beside Smoky with a hand on one of Celeste's thighs. Smoky's a calm horse with lots of experience with disabled folks. If he should spook, or if Celeste starts to fall, you need to be ready to catch her. Can you do that?"

They both nodded, looking nervous. Celeste leaned against the back of the saddle, suddenly afraid.

"I want you to remember the happiest, best ride you ever went on," Barb told her. "Take some breaths, relax, let your muscles remember what it feels like to be on a horse."

Celeste nodded and remembered riding bareback on Fancy up a dirt road near her family's farm. It was a peaceful, happy memory. Her fear dissipated. Oh, how she had dreamed of riding again! And here she was, on a horse!

Impossible!

Magical!

*What's the worst thing that can happen? I fall off and die?*

She couldn't stop laughing. ■

"The Second Bucket List" is available for pre-order now on Amazon as a soft-cover and as a Kindle eBook, with a release date of January 5th. It will also be available from Barnes & Noble and many other distributors, and from Country Bookshelf in downtown Bozeman. Contact Connie from her website, [GatheringTheSoul.com](http://GatheringTheSoul.com), by email at [mtlionlady@gmail.com](mailto:mtlionlady@gmail.com), or by phone at (406) 582-7450.



*Connie Myslik-McFadden is a Jungian-oriented psychotherapist and writer who moved from Princeton, N.J. to Bozeman, Montana almost thirty years ago. She leads dream groups and women's retreats and has been a Hospice volunteer for several years. The*

*mountain trails surrounding Bozeman, and Yellowstone National Park, beckon frequently, and she ventures forth as often as possible.*